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ABSTRACT

Previous research, conducted when divorce was still relatively atypical, indicated that teachers have lower expectations for children from divorced families than for children from intact families. The purpose of this study was to identify current attitudes of preservice teachers toward children from different family structures. Student teachers (N=85) were asked to identify their perceptions of children in 4 family structures: (1) an intact family; (2) a divorced-single parent; (3) a never-married single parent; and (4) a divorced, gay parent family. It was hypothesized that the intact family and the divorced family would be perceived more positively than the less common family structures. The student teachers completed a questionnaire comprised of vignettes followed by 30 adjectives--half positive and half negative. Findings indicated that perception of the stigma of divorce on children has lessened; divorced, single-parent families had the most positive characteristics; the child seen most consistently in a negative light was from a never-married family; and surprisingly, the child in a gay household was described more positively overall than the child in an intact family. The limited nature of the sample, primarily rural and possibly naive concerning societal changes in family structure, is emphasized. (Contains 19 references.) (LL)

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# Pre-Service Teachers' Expectations for Children From Different Family Structures

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# Pre-Service Teachers' Expectations for Children From Different Family Structures

## Abstract

Previous research suggested that teachers have lower expectations for children from divorced families than children from intact families. Largely, this research was conducted when divorce was still relatively atypical. This project identified current attitudes toward children from different family structures.

Eighty-five student teachers responded to a questionnaire describing the family situations of four different children. Chi-square analysis found a significant difference between the child and the number of positive or negative descriptive adjectives selected to describe each child; $X^2$ (3, $N$ = 3170) = 287.39, $p < .01$.

The child living with her unwed single mother received many more negative and many fewer positive responses than would be expected. Results suggest that while attitudes toward divorce have shifted, family structure may still greatly affect a teacher's expectation for a child.

# Pre-Service Teachers' Expectations for Children From Different Family Structures

There is little argument concerning the findings that teacher perceptions of students influence teacher expectations. The research of Brophy and colleagues (Brophy, 1983; Good, Biddle, & Brophy, 1982;) and the model of teacher expectations they have created are generally accepted (Biehler & Smowman, 1993; Dweck & Elliot, 1983; Shaffer, 1993). Teacher perceptions of students differentially affect teacher behavior, which then influences student outcomes. Therefore, identifying those student characteristics which affect teacher expectations is important.

Another generally accepted notion is that the families from which students come are (and have been) changing for some time. Teachers can no longer assume that children will be living with two biological parents. Public school students come to the classroom from a myriad of living arrangements. Glick (1988) has published much of the demographic data that chronicles these changes. His writings suggest that as many as one-fourth of all children do not live with two parents; that one-fifth of children under eighteen living with 2 parents live in a remarried family; and that one-fifth of all married couple families with children are remarried families (Glick, 1988). Over 10% of families with children under age 18 are one-parent families and another 8% are "other" family structures (Glick, 1989).

General knowledge and societal stereotypes still, to some extent, continue the belief system that children in families that differ from the two-parent family are deviant in some way (Bryan, Coleman, Ganong, & Bryan, 1986;

Ganong, Coleman, & Mapes, 1990). The literature on children's adjustment to divorce is still in flux (Allen, 1993; Amato, 1993; Demo, 1993; and Kurdek, 1993). Research is almost non-existent about children in other non-tradition families, such as homosexual couples with children (Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993). Bronstein, Clauson, Stoll, and Abrams (1993) suggest that it is not the family structure that affects the child's adjustment, but the number of changes the child undergoes.

Given that teacher perceptions and expectations do affect student outcomes, given that children are coming from an increasing variety of family structures, and given that there are, in the general population, stereotypes against children from non-traditional families; teacher's expectations and perceptions of children from non-traditional family structures can be very important. Few research studies have been conducted in this area. What has been published has chiefly examined teacher perceptions in relation to children from intact families vs. children from divorced families. As early as 1978, Santrock and Tracey found that undergraduate and graduate education students held significantly more negative expectations for children from divorced families as compared to children from intact families. Fuller (1986) asked teachers to rate behaviors as more likely to be expected from children from two-parent (non-divorced) homes and children from single parent families. This study also indicated a decidedly negative viewpoint regarding perceptions of children from divorced families. Positive behaviors were typically associated with children from intact homes while negative behaviors were associated with children in single-parent families (Fuller, 1986).

In contrast to the above findings, Goldstein-Hendley, Green, & Evans (1986) found that practicing teachers did not differ in their expectations for children from intact and divorced families. This study also examined the teacher's own marital status (married or divorced) and found that this variable did not affect expectations (Goldstein-Hendley, Green, & Evans, 1986). The methodology for the study was based upon that used by Santrock and Tracey (1978).

The authors' purpose for this study was two-fold. First, many societal changes have occurred since the mid-eighties and non-traditional family structures are ever-present in the media. The authors hypothesized that negative stereotypes were decreasing and pre-service teachers would not have different perceptions for children of intact and divorced families. The second purpose was to include family structures not yet investigated. To this end, pre-service teachers were asked to identify perceptions of a child in four family structures: 1) an intact family; 2) a divorced-single parent; 3) a never-married single parent; and 4) a divorced, gay parent family. While the authors hoped that perceptions across family structures would not differ, the hypothesis was that the children in the intact family and the divorced family would be perceived more positively than the children in the two less prevalent family structures.

## Method

### *Sample*

The sample consisted of 85 pre-service elementary education teachers. All but two of the participants were female. The university serves a primarily rural, southern area. The students were participating in their

student teaching semester, and had been in the field for approximately 12 weeks. Their placements were primarily in small, rural school districts.

*Measures*

The authors developed a questionnaire based upon the Personal Attribute Inventory developed by Parish, Bryant, and Shirazi (1976). The questionnaire was comprised of four vignettes followed by 30 adjectives listed in alphabetical order. Half of the attributes were positive (such as: curious, motivated, and sensitive) and half were negative (such as : aggressive, distressed, and mean).

Each vignette described a child between seven- and nine- years of age. The following outlines the information for each vignette: One girl lived with a divorced mother and grandmother; one boy lived with his intact family; one girl lived with a never-married mother and siblings; and one boy lived with his father and his father's male companion. Race of the child was never indicated; socio-economic status of the families was implied in two cases and clearly stated in a third.

*Procedures*

The students were gathered in a large group session on campus. Directions for the questionnaire were read, as well as the purpose of the study explained. Students read each vignette and then were asked to mark ten adjectives they thought would best describe the child.

## Results

Only two students out of the group initially refused to make evaluations of the children given the scant amount of information. Not all respondents

chose ten adjectives; while some chose more than ten and some chose fewer than ten, all responses were analyzed.

Differences in attributions were found. Table 1 identifies the number of positive and negative responses each child garnered, as well as expected frequencies. A Chi-square analysis was completed in order to determine if significant differences emerged. Such significant findings did occur $X^2$ (3, $n$ = 3170) = 287.39, $p < .01$. The first hypothesis, that the child from the intact family would rank highest, was not supported; the child from the divorced, single parent family was rated most positively and least negatively. There is some support for the second hypothesis that children from more non-traditional families will be viewed as less positive. The child from the intact family and the child from the divorced, gay parent family were viewed similarly - more positively than negatively. The child who garnered the most negative and least positive characteristics was the child from the never married family.

Child 1 (living with divorced mother and grandmother) was described as attentive, clean, courteous, friendly, happy and sensitive by over half of the respondents. She was never described as mean, and fewer than 5% of the respondents identified her as disobedient, inflexible, or scornful. Child 2 (living with intact family) was described by over half of the respondents as aggressive, curious, friendly. No responses were chosen fewer than 5% for this child. Child 3 (living with never married mother and siblings) was consistently described as distressed, and sensitive by over half of the sample. Child 4 (living with a divorced father and his male companion) was

consistently described as clean, curious, friendly, and motivated by over half of the respondent, while fewer than 5% described him as clumsy or sickly.

## Discussion

The findings suggest that, to some extent, the stigma of divorce on children has lessened. A child from a divorced, single-parent family was attributed with the most positive and least negative characteristics of the four children. The child who was seen most consistently in a negative light was the child from a never-married family. Interestingly, this same child was also seen as very sensitive. The two boys, from very different backgrounds, were described somewhat similarly. A surprising finding was that the child in the gay household was described, overall, as more positively than the child in the intact family.

An inadvertent characteristic of the vignettes may explain the findings more clearly than differences in family structure. Descriptions of Child 2 and Child 3 indicated (although did not state) that the families were probably of low socio-economic status. Child 2 lived in a trailer while Child 3 lived in public housing. In contrast, Child 4 lived in a upper middle class home. No clear indication was given for the SES level of Child 1. It could be the somewhat unexpected positive characterization of Child 4 (given the unusual family structure) is due to high family SES and the negative characterization of Child 3 is due to a very low SES.

The limited nature of the sample must also be recognized. While efforts are made to expose preservice teachers to cultural diversity and the changing nature of the family in society, the sample is primarily rural and possibly

naive concerning societal changes in family structure. Findings in another setting may yield very different results.

Regardless of whether the findings are best explained by family structure or family SES, they do pose a concern. Preservice teachers are entering the field with sets of perceptions and expectations that can be harmful to the students in their classes. Teacher educators must develop a clearer picture of the influences and expectations of our clientele; from this we can develop curricula that will help to break down the negative expectations and improve student achievement.

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Table 1.

Positive and Negative Characteristics Attributed to Children from Different Family Structures

| Child | Number of Positive Attributions | Number of Negative Attributions | Total Attributions |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 630 | 157 | 787 |
| | *(500.75) | (286.25) | |
| 2 | 471 | 314 | 785 |
| | (499.98) | (285.52) | |
| 3 | 343 | 470 | 813 |
| | (517.29) | (295.71) | |
| 4 | 573 | 212 | 785 |
| | (499.48) | (285.52) | |

* numbers in parenthesis represent expected frequencies

Child 1 - female, lives with divorced mother and grandmother

Child 2 - male, lives with intact family

Child 3 - female, lives with never married mother and siblings

Child 4 - male, lives with divorced father and his male friend